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The Washington Post A-25
The New York Times
The Washington Times
The Wall Street Journal
The Christian Science Monitor
New York Daily News
USA Today
The Chicago Tribune

Date 17 JUNE 1988

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Cuban Fingerprints in Panama

STAT

Cuban infiltration of money and arms for Panama strong man Gen. Manuel Noriega may force the Reagan administration to try getting rid of him with direct action, an approach radically different from the failed inducements that have proven so costly to U.S. prestige and credibility.

The White House has not held a single top-level meeting since May 22 on how to break Noriega's stranglehold over his country. Thus, officials say privately, the Reagan administration has ended face-saving efforts to remove him via negotiations.

That suggests President Reagan may be considering less public means to stop the indicted drug dealer's nose-thumbing at Uncle Sam. High officials are silent about what those means might be. But they confide that time is running out on the U.S. recovery of credibility as a great power. National prestige and U.S. influence in Latin America demand getting Noriega and Cuban dirty tricks out of Panama.

Cuban fingerprints are multiplying. Using highly sensitive intelligence only recently received here, administration officials have been able to reconstruct events on the night of April 12 at the Marine perimeter protecting the U.S. tank farm at Howard Air Force Base. The midnight firing, only about five kilometers from the Panama Canal, was briefly reported at the time by the Pentagon as a sporadic "firefight" of unknown origin or intensity.

In fact, that engagement pitted the small Marine detachment against an estimated "special force" of about 50 Cubans, known by their Soviet designation as "spetsnaz."

Defensive flares were inadvertently tripped by the Cubans, giving the Marines fairly accurate lines of fire. Eight Cubans were wounded, one of whom later died. The wounded were taken by their officers under extraordinary secrecy to the Panama City military hospital of the Panama Defense Forces. The PDF, embodying the nation's entire military and political strength, is commanded by and constitutes the power source of Noriega.

Under cover of darkness the following night, all eight Cubans (including the one who died) were spirited out of the hospital under direct supervision of the first secretary of the Cuban Embassy. U.S. officials told us they were placed aboard a Cuban vessel at the Pacific end of the Canal and shipped immediately back to Cuba.

That incident points up dangerous possibilities of Cuban intervention if the U.S. struggle to oust Noriega ever turns into full-scale military combat. It has been completely hushed up, both here and in Panama. Officials in position to know the facts refuse to speculate on whether it was an isolated event or perhaps one of several efforts by Cuban "spetsnaz" to penetrate or at least test U.S. defenses in the Canal Zone. That would provide vital information for any assault trying to overrun the Marines.

Also hushed up is a report that Noriega has approved stationing a secret Cuban transmitting station in the Panama jungles manned by the DGI, the Cuban intelligence service. U.S. officials also say it is incontrovertible that Cuban and Panamanian aircraft, mostly the U.S.-made Boeing 727, make frequent runs between Cuba and Panama; they often carry Soviet or Eastern bloc weapons such as the AK-47 automatic rifle to Noriega's PDF or for prepositioning against the possibility of future conflict.

The current theory that the Reagan administration is unconcerned about these events stems from the absence of public posturing against Noriega since failure of "plea bargaining" to get him out of Panama in return for cancellation of his drug indictment.

The last meeting of the National Security Planning Group on the Panama crisis was chaired by the president in the West Parlor of the White House on Sunday, May 22, before the Moscow summit. No new meeting has been scheduled.

That implies policy making has gone underground, as Reagan himself obliquely suggested it might as that Sunday session ended. Once again Secretary of State George Shultz had been unable to persuade Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci that force was essential to exorcise the Noriega devil. The president's two top advisers had been able to agree only on the passive route of negotiations.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Reagan himself raised this question: What do we do if Noriega won't deal?

Referring to Shultz's long-standing plea for using force against Noriega, one of Reagan's advisers replied: Well, Mr. President, George Shultz had some ideas about what we could do. Yes, said Shultz with heavy sarcasm, but "I thought those were hare-brained schemes."

One month later, policy may now finally be moving the way Shultz always wanted, away from negotiations and toward some form of direct action. Nobody is yet spelling it out, but Cuban meddling is pushing a reluctant Washington that way.

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